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Number A26674

by

Agnes Wohl Richman

It was the Winter of 1945, when World War II was in its last gasps. I was sixteen at the time and in the German concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, where typhoid fever, dysentery, and hunger had already killed over 35,000 of the 50,000 inhabitants.

The cream of Hungarian intellectual society was present: opera singers, fine actresses, dancers, lawyers, professors, doctors, and just average people like myself. Death surrounded us, either purposely inflicted by our captors, or caused by sickness and malnutrition. I was with five hundred women in a barracks about forty feet long and twenty feet wide. We only had room for sitting places on the floor, and went to sleep at night sitting up on a little straw, leaning against one another.

Though the conditions were horrible, there was no social distinction between us. We were all starving, thirsty, and suffering from lice and fever. The Germans, aware that their days were numbered, appeared undecided what to do with us. Rail transport to more efficient extermination camps like Auschwitz and Ravensbrück was no longer available or reliable. While the Nazi overlords pondered our fate, we were confined to our places with no way to put into action any will to live, let alone fight.

Every night twenty or more of us would die. In the morning,

we had to carry the dead outside. By now they were virtual skeletons. The male prisoners from another barracks would pile these bodies on a wagon and take them to a mass grave. The men warned us never to go near there, for it was a horrible sight.

We who remained alive tried desperately to make the atmosphere more cheerful. The woman opera singer, with her voice weak from hunger, sang shaky arias from Tosca and Rigoletto. The ballet dancer, with what must have been her last strength, tried to recapture the movements of a dying swan. I was not a performer, but I liked to recite poetry, which I did with much emotion. As one by one we performed, the atmosphere slowly began to change. The groans of the sick ones became muted; everyone turned quiet and listened carefully. We tried our best to pool our talents and perform as often as we could to ease everyone's misery.

After one of the opera singer's vocals, I engaged her in a conversation. Errin told me her story. She lived in Budapest, and for the last four years had been a principal with the National Operahaus. I asked her how she had come to Bergen-Belsen. Her story of trickery was not unlike my own and many others . Opera singer Errin, who was just 22-years-old, went for the false ads the SS had put out, urging talented young Jewish girls to register at the SS central office, promising them everything good. Errin registered right away. But as soon as she registered, she became a hostage. She told me, "With the next transport they shipped me to Bergen-Belsen." Everybody I met had their own tragic story.

Some Jews never made it to the transport; they were taken down to the banks of the Danube and shot by the Gestapo. Still,

the Jewish people of Budapest were luckier than the Jews elsewhere. A great humanitarian, Consul Raoul Wallenberg from Sweden, managed to issue Swedish passports to many Jewish people. He also bought up real estate for housing them, places they would be safe.

At Bergen-Belsen, by sheer accident, I met Anne Frank. One day when I walked past the barracks where Dutch hostages were housed, she was outside and introduced herself. I can never forget her beautiful, expressive eyes. In a humble way, she said to me, "Look at these rags I wear. Would you believe I danced ballet when I was younger?" Anne looked so emaciated. She was so young, but seemed so wise for her age. We talked for a while and she said to me, "There's not enough food for everyone in the camp. What will the Germans do? Every day more prisoners are coming in to join us."

Anne told me that she'd heard the Russian Army had been victorious on the Eastern Front, and that the American and British forces were making great advances in the West. I nodded and said to her, "Surely then, it won't be long until the end of the war."

She was so intelligent, it was a pleasure to be around her, if only for a moment. I said, "Anne, you must hold on. Eat what rations you have and have a will to survive." I also urged her to try to find work in the community kitchen, where she might hide carrots under her clothing. "Carrots have vitamins, she acknowledged. We talked for a while longer, and promised to get together in a few days.

A week later, I set out to visit Anne Frank again, but I was not successful. A typhoid epidemic had broken out in her

barrack. They tried to segregate the sick ones from the healthy inmates, and nobody could tell me where they sent Anne and Margot Frank. After the war ended, I went to Sweden to live. I learned the Swedish language quickly and was able to read the newspapers. I read how Otto Frank was hopeful his two daughters might return from Bergen-Belsen, but later he learned the awful truth: both had come down with typhoid fever and passed away four weeks before the British had liberated the camp.

In April 1945, when everything looked the darkest and most hopeless in Bergen-Belsen, the heroic 18th British Army , the King's Royal Rifle Corps, arrived. We prisoners could not believe our eyes, for they were wearing kilts. None of us had ever seen men in skirts before! I thought I was delirious and having visions. Then we heard the loudspeaker: "We have come to liberate you! We have brought you food, and medication, and physicians to take care of you. You must hold on! If you have the will to live, we will help you!"

My happiness was not complete, for I was thinking of my two sisters who were unconscious. They had encountered the dreaded typhus fever and needed help right away.

Things did happen quickly. In a few days there were ambulances, though only a few, not enough. I was not very strong, but I carried on my back first Margo, then Elizabeth to the nearest ambulance which was at the far end of the compound. I gave my sisters' names to the driver, but he was too busy to bother with identification.

My sisters were taken to a quickly assembled, temporary hospital. Soon, the rest of us were cared for. We were given some Army food that did not agree with us after our starvation.

We were also disinfected, given clean clothes, and moved to clean quarters in a former SS camp.

When I had the strength, I began the search for my sisters. In the endless wards I had to look at everybody's faces for there were no names at the foot of the beds. First I found Margo. She was very weak and disoriented, but she was alive. I was so happy. I said to Margo, "You must get better. We've been liberated, and the war has ended." Margo, who had just turned fourteen, said, "No more suffering? I have to get healthy and strong soon so I can make my dreams come true."

I nodded, tears rolling down my face. It took another two weeks before I found Elizabeth. I was so thankful she was still alive, though in such bad mental and physical condition she didn't recognize me. She said, "I think the SS has blinded me."

I tried to tell her, "It's caused by the high fever you've been through. The doctor's say a thin layer of film has covered your eyes, but it's only temporary. Your vision will return and you'll be well soon."

Noticing that she couldn't eat the food the hospital provided, I decided to take matters into my own hands. One morning I got up early and hiked to a nearby German village. I found a prosperous farm with chickens. The two chickens I took made so much noise I had to ring their necks and I was lucky to get away.

Later, in my quarters, I plucked the birds, roasted them, and even made chicken soup. The next day I brought the delicious food to Elizabeth's hospital, and Margo's as well. My sisters enjoyed it.

Margo recovered completely. Unfortunately, Elizabeth didn't

make it.

Today I may be settled in a comofortable life in America, but I often look back on the inhumanity of those awful war years. I've had much time to think about the Holocaust, and I still can't understand what turned an advanced, civilized nation like Germany toward the gangster mind set of Nazism. The mystery of what motivated those individuals whose fingers were on the triggers at Babi Yar, or who operated the gas chambers and ovens at Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and numerous other sites, remains unanswered.

I shall never forget those times. How can I, when Number A26674 will forever glare back at me from my forearm?